Jane Smiley on What St. Louis Tells Us About America
The author finds her hometown perhaps the most enlightening spot in America for exploring what America really is.

By Jane Smiley
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I don't think most Americans view St. Louis as a tourist destination, but they should. Even as I was enjoying my fall sojourn, activists were protesting current conditions there, and I could see why — infrastructure, housing, and wages need serious investment.

But my hometown is still beautiful, still full of unique attractions, and, I think, perhaps the most enlightening spot in America for exploring what America really is.

There have always been racial and economic inequalities here. Because Missouri was a Border State, both slaves and free African-Americans walked the streets before and during the Civil War. In the early 20th century, African-American districts had some say in city politics because each city district elected its own aldermen and the mayor was mostly a figurehead. Even now, though, St. Louis is one of the country’s most segregated cities, according to a 2017 study. There are significant disparities in investment in the city, with black communities being left behind. African-American residents live at a poverty rate over three times higher than whites.

When I was growing up in the 1950s, public swimming pools were segregated, public transport was not. And while resistance to integrated schools remains strong, it was not even a topic of conversation, as I recall, when African-American students showed up at my elementary school (I was in second grade). And there have long been protests over racial injustice, as there are now — I would say protests are as much a part of St. Louis history as anything else.

Clarence Lang, professor of African and African-American studies at the University of Kansas and author of "Grassroots at the Gateway," said that as the northernmost Southern city and the westernmost Eastern city, St. Louis has had peculiar forms of racial stratification. "There were inequalities," he said, "but there was also interracial civic management involving African-Americans and whites."

Today, as the city undergoes major redevelopment, Professor Lang said it is occurring at the expense of black working class and poor communities, many of which have been dislocated to declining areas of St. Louis County.

Even so, he added, "St. Louis is a fascinating place, culturally, and its heritages as a passageway to the west, as well as a transition point to and from the South via the Mississippi River, make it a city well worth visiting — just not during the winter!"

Perhaps I disagree with Professor Lang only on this — I would say just not during July and August, given the humidity.

Our drive around town was hopeful, then worrisome, then beautiful, then ugly. I kept my eyes on autumn leaves, so lovely in October, but we had to see the forest, too.

St. Louisans today don't seem as optimistic as they did when I was growing up, but when I returned, there was a bustling, life-goes-on quality to the traffic, the parks, the tourist destinations. People smile, laugh, are friendly.
We stayed at the Cheshire, an idiosyncratic Tudor-style hotel across from the southwest corner of Forest Park, the site of the 1904 World's Fair. I remember eating in the restaurant with my parents; I did not remember the Cheshire's Anglophilia — every room named for an English author. I went looking for my favorites, Nancy Mitford and Anthony Trollope (fourth floor). The more obscure ones, like Elizabeth Gaskell, give the inn an intellectual air. We stayed in the George Gissing room (a volume of “The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire” sat on a side table). The walls in the corridors were covered with art, including Forese's 19th-century Coaching Recollections, knights in armor, young women looking innocent, young men looking stiff. A gas station was still just up the street, on an island between Clayton Road and Clayton Avenue, and out the back windows were modest neighborhoods of dark brick houses. This was not a resort.

All of the St. Louis neighborhoods, some boarded up, some so grand that they astounded even my unimpressed ex-realtor husband, Jack, from Philadelphia, and some of which were regular middle class streets, bumped up against one another, faded into one another. Every time I've returned, the late-19th-century houses have lured me, surprised me, made me look at the real estate pages in the St. Louis Post-Dispatch. But what set the houses off, made them seem jewel-like, were the huge oaks and small sassafras and maples, the chestnuts, rowans. The hills rose to the trees, displayed them; the houses peeked around them, flickered with shadows.

I was there for my 50th high school reunion; time seemed to have collapsed behind me. Jack and I attended the events, but I wanted to investigate what had not changed — an obvious candidate was the Gateway Arch, which I first visited when it was still being built, in 1964. At that point, two silver curves pushed toward one another even as the architects worried that they might not meet. This time, whether they wash it or leave that to the rain, when we drove past, we were struck by its flashing gleam in the bright sunshine.

Another thing that hadn't changed (much) was the Missouri Botanical Garden, founded by Henry Shaw, who was born in England in 1800, and came to the United States to look for a shipment of his family's metal goods that had been lost in New Orleans. He found it, took a trip up the river to St. Louis, set up a hardware store to import his father's...
In 1850, Shaw built himself an estate, started developing his garden. He opened it to the public in 1859. Now the oldest continuously operating botanical garden in the country, it was crammed with trees and plants. As we walked along the paths, I couldn’t resist looking at every identifying marker (on the trees, some were 15 feet off the ground). It is 79 acres, every step rich and enlightening. There was a rose garden, an iris garden, an herb garden, a children’s garden, a sensory garden (my favorite plant was the chocolate mint). In front of Shaw’s original mansion, we peered through the bars at a marble effigy of Shaw. He was on his back, and looked like he would like to roll over onto his side.

The family destination that had changed the most since I was a child was the Saint Louis Zoo. The original exhibit, the “flight cage,” now houses 15 species of “cypress swamp” birds, that is, birds that inhabit Southern Illinois and southern Missouri, where the Mississippi and the Ohio rivers meet. One of my favorite earlier tourists to St. Louis, Charles Dickens, was supremely disappointed when he arrived at the junction of the rivers — in his book American Notes he called the spot “a dismal swamp” and the Mississippi “an enormous ditch.”

In the 1950s, some of the zoo’s animals were housed in small areas surrounded by fake cliffs, others in large cages. There were many shows — I remember lions, elephants, monkeys. But zoos now recognize that they must be a refuge for animals, not a display case. We watched the black rhinoceros. His compound had three wings — he wandered here and there. His mate and his 6-month-old offspring were not with him. The hippos drifted about in a giant tank, visible beneath the surface of the water and above it. There were a lot of spots where no animals appeared, although the zoo houses almost 10,000 individuals (including centipedes, armadillos, catfish, giraffes, lions and woodchucks). I was disappointed and pleased — the zoo has done the best it can to transform itself from a place of spectacle to a place of education.

Forest Park, which houses the zoo, is 1,293 acres. It has a golf course where my grandfather used to play, tennis courts, the Missouri History Museum, the St. Louis Art Museum, a theater, a skating rink, the zoo and the Jewel Box, an ornate greenhouse built in 1934 and recently refurbished. There is also, as I saw when I crossed the street from the Cheshire Inn and walked around, a thick forest along the southeast end, with paths and huge trees, weeds, falling leaves, probably poison ivy, and signs that said that this part of the park was being returned to the wilderness.

St. Louis has always had gustatorial variety: French, barbecue (baked ribs with a sweet sauce), schnitzel and sauerbraten (especially at Schnheithorst’s Restaurant & Bar, a St. Louis county institution on the corner of Lindbergh Boulevard and Clayton Road).

The district my parents never took me to was The Hill, the Italian neighborhood southeast of Forest Park where Yogi Berra and Joe Garagiola grew up. We picked Charlie Gitto’s. The Hill is filled with modest rows of houses, crisscrossed by narrow streets. Charlie Gitto’s is a long brick building with a small front porch, wedged between two narrow parking lots. When we entered the restaurant, we felt a little uncomfortable. The spaces were tight and dimly lit; we were told to remove our baseball caps, because there was a time when displaying your loyalty could lead to a fight.
We, of course, opted for the toasted ravioli, a St. Louis specialty, and then my husband chose the veal cordon bleu and I chose the six-ounce filet Siciliano, rolled in bread crumbs, grilled and served with a secret sauce that includes, the menu said, "cheeses and lemon."

We did not expect to be impressed, having been to San Francisco, New York City, Rome. The toasted ravioli was good — don't have to try that again. Jack's flattened veal was savory and crisp — good enough. And then, my first bite of the filet Siciliano nearly knocked me out of my chair, sublime enough to block every other taste memory, at least for the rest of the evening. The only downside was that the parking lot had no back exit and we could hardly figure out how to maneuver between the brick wall of the restaurant and the tail-ends of all the other cars.

Brick! If there is anything that screams "St. Louis!" it is brick. And 199 types were made south of Forest Park, not far from the Cheshire Inn, in an area called Dogtown. In this rather small area (six mile periphery), there were at least 14 brick factories.

The next morning, when I crossed Clayton Road from the Cheshire and wandered along North Skinker Boulevard, the houses were a panorama of brick-choice. I loved the oddest one, small and square, tannish gold, with arches, a second-floor balcony, a red tiled roof, a fanciful chimney. I was also struck by a simpler house built of red-gold bricks that glistened in the sunlight.

The rows of brick houses around Skinker looked old and indestructible, but we saw the downside when we headed into the city — many brick houses were boarded up, others had collapsing roofs, smoke stains along the walls. They are much harder to dismantle than clapboard houses. Bricks represent the glory and the danger of St. Louis's history — many still graceful and beautiful in the middle class and wealthy neighborhoods, but in the poorer areas, their history is a burden and a reminder.

My grandfather worked for International Shoe Company, in the tannery where they turned the hides into leather across the Mississippi, not downtown, in the huge shoe company warehouse that was turned into the City Museum in 1997. This "museum" is something I have never seen before, a playground/junk collection full of children and their parents, designed by Bob Cassilly. I would like to say that I knew him in elementary school in Webster Groves, the St. Louis County suburb where I grew up, because he was about my age, and that we collected fossils down in Deer Creek, but I can't. Surely he had lots of fun with this museum.

The vast exhibition, indoors and outdoors, includes "old chimneys, salvaged bridges, construction cranes, miles of tile, and even two abandoned planes," as well as caves, a 10-story slide, a tree house, a Ferris wheel, a castle turret, and the world's largest pencil. It is one of the most popular museums in the United States, but I could only take it for an hour. We wandered around the four floors, watched the kids explore the outdoor balconies. It also includes a prominent first-aid room, and I could see why.

Not far away is the Field House Museum, built in 1845 by Roswell Field, the father of Eugene Field, who wrote "Little Boy Blue" and "The Gingham Dog and the Calico Cat." Roswell Field was famous as Dred Scott's attorney when Scott was fighting against being re-enslaved in the 1850s. The United States Supreme Court decision against Scott was made public in March 1857 on the steps of the St. Louis Courthouse. Fortunately, Scott was given his freedom that May, but he died at the age of 59, 15 months later. The Dred Scott decision is widely considered one of the worst decisions the Supreme Court ever made. The Field House is the last rowhouse remaining on the street, with narrow, steep stairs, and friendly exhibits of toys, books and the paraphernalia of mid-19th century daily life. We were the only visitors.
I preferred the National Blues Museum, on Washington Avenue. Josephine Baker and Chuck Berry were among the many musicians born in St. Louis. The museum offers educational exhibitions, interactive displays and weekly live music shows, and sponsors "Blues in the Schools," an outreach program that links local music, musicians, geography and history. There were photos to peruse, songs to listen to, cases of instruments and costumes to gawk at (the most amusing item was a flipbook of Chuck Berry doing his walk).

The museum is ambitious, but friendly, and right next door to the Sugar Fire Smokehouse, an extremely popular barbecue restaurant where the line goes out the door. The daily hours are "11 a.m. until they run out." The ribs were delicious.

But there is more to St. Louis than St. Louis. In 1803, at the behest of President Thomas Jefferson, the explorers Meriwether Lewis and William Clark camped a few miles south of the mouth of the Missouri for about five months, unable to get permission to enter St. Louis, because control of the territory by the French and the Spanish was still under dispute. They spent their time in Illinois stocking their keelboat (a reconstruction at the Lewis and Clark State Historic Site seemed remarkably small, given that it was meant to carry 25 men and all of their supplies), then set out on their landmark expedition in 1804.

But maybe the most interesting spot is deeper in the past: the Cahokia Mounds State Historic Site where, in about A.D. 1100, an indigenous group, possibly migrants through the Ohio River Valley, began to build themselves a city that eventually numbered 40,000 citizens.
The land is flat, but the soil is excellent, and allowed the Cahokians to construct 120 huge mounds — the conical ones were for burials, the platform mounds for habitation, and long, triangular ones, called ridgetop mounds, that might have been built for defense or burials.

The film and the displays in the exhibition hall were more informative than at any site I’ve ever visited but what drew me was the path across the lush grass through the trees, between the mounds, a wonderful walk.

When I was growing up, my school should have sent us here on a field trip. We should have learned that the Cahokians prospered for about 300 years, growing maize, hunting the plentiful local fauna, and catching fish, building platform earth constructions.

Then harvests got iffy, local resources were depleted. The now too-large population began to die off, had to leave.

The Cahokians were ambitious, Lewis and Clark were ambitious, the Louisiana Purchase was ambitious, T.S. Eliot, Maya Angelou, and Chuck Berry, all born here, were ambitious. The St. Louis World’s Fair was intended to teach Chicago a lesson.

When I looked at the Gateway Arch again, on the way back to the hotel, I realized that I was in what is perhaps the paradigmatic American city, a busy place where history, commerce, art and geography have often connected and often clashed in supremely American ways. And Cahokia, across the river, is the main lesson I learn — that nature can do us in if we don’t pay attention.

Jane Smiley is the author of many novels and works of nonfiction. She was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction for her novel "A Thousand Acres" in 1992.

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Correction: Oct. 24, 2019
An earlier version of this article misstated the birthplace of the ragtime composer and pianist Scott Joplin. The scholarly consensus is that Joplin was probably born in northeastern Texas, though there is no definitive proof as to where; he was not born in St. Louis, where he lived as an adult.

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